

A Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday by Larry Rawlings

May 11, 2014

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

We continue our reading of Saint John's Gospel in the Sundays after Easter.

Saint John was the disciple whom Jesus loved, the one who knew Jesus best and was closest to his heart. This privileged position of John gives his Gospel a unique and somewhat deeper perspective than the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke.

From all the evangelists and from the Old Testament too, we are used to the image of the Good Shepherd; "The Lord is my shepherd," we recited with the Psalmist in our response this morning. But in The Gospel we just heard, The Lord is not the Shepherd; He is the gate to the pen where the sheep are kept, the gate through which the shepherd must pass.

We are not used to this metaphor. We are used to Jesus being the Shepherd

and if it confused you when you heard it or missed it, well the Pharisees too did not realize exactly what Jesus was saying and he had to repeat himself.

The real shepherds, the good shepherds whose voices the sheep recognize and heed, must pass through the protecting gate of Jesus Christ. If they come through this gate, they are genuine, and the sheep can count on them and safely follow. If the shepherd or shepherds do not enter by this gate, that is if they climb over the wall or fence to get to the sheep, Jesus says they are thieves, out to steal the sheep and take

them astray.

This is an important message for us at Easter-time because Jesus is no longer with us in the same way he was for the apostles and disciples before the Resurrection and for 40 days after. Then he was clearly the shepherd, taking his followers around to different pastures and places ...this side of the Lake, that side, up mountains, down mountains, Samaria, Bethany, Jerusalem; Jesus even fed them and went so far as to wash them.

He was there to personally defend them against all the high synagogue criticism ... Why don't your disciples fast? Why are your disciples sinners?" And so on.

But after the Ascension, and after Pentecost, the Apostles, we are tempted to say, were on their own. Jesus was not there in the same way. He had become the gate and they were now the shepherds.

John's Gospel says nothing about the Ascension, unlike Mark and Luke.

Like Matthew, also an apostle evangelist, John's message is that Jesus is still here, always with us until the end. The gate, the doorway to God, to life. Jesus is essential for sheep and shepherds. If the Shepherds must pass through the gate to encounter the sheep, both shepherds and sheep must pass through the gate in order to go out into the pastures and do all the things sheep do out there in the world.

As a church of sheep we have no choice but to be out there in the pasture of the world, but we are not to be OF the world, we are not to belong to the world as world, but to the world as God intended it to be; we are to belong to the kingdom of God. Our life and direction as Jesus' church is determined by his defense and care for the flock against an enemy that seeks "only to steal, slaughter and destroy."

Jesus knows the world that his disciples and we must go out

into and he promises to guide us in it, by vetting the shepherds for us, by being the standard against which they are to be judged. There have been and still are all too-many false shepherds who claim easy solutions to people's ills and call to us sheep with seductive voices.

-voices that too easily call out for war to settle ancient and modern differences between peoples

-voices that too easily call for an end to war before there is any possibility of hope for peace.

- voices of excess that tempt people to follow work-a-holic life-draining patterns

-voices of indulgence that lure us to drain our both our bodies and our world's natural resources for temporary satisfaction that will leave future generations in want and stress.

-voices of isolation that would cut us off from the needs of people beyond family and immediate community

-voices of gluttony that cause us to damage our health, while ignoring the hunger of others

-voices of discouragement that cause us to give up on God, on ourselves, on other people, on our efforts to help others, on efforts that require perseverance and long-range commitment.

We may no longer raise sheep or act sheepishly, but who hasn't heard the voice of one or more of these shepherds of self interest who would lead us away from our faith on paths to foreign and strange pastures ?

We are fortunate in our church to be able to identify our shepherds who enter by the gate. The true shepherd isn't just a leader of a flock: and we are not just part of a crowd flock. The true shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." It's good to know that we are named and known, not only by God, but by real shepherds. In biblical language,

to know a person's name is to know the person. So, even if we try to hide as anonymous Christians we are well known and our needs are recognized

by the Risen Christ in our midst. One way we can respond to today's gospel is to get to know other people "by name" too. Especially those who are different from us.

If our faith tells us that Jesus knows each of us by name, with all that implies,

then how can we go about helping others also to know that they are significant & appreciated ? How many for whom Jesus came are suffered, are unknown?

Jesus says in John 6:37-40 "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me,

but that I should raise it (on) the last day."

God wants that no one be lost, and if no one is to be lost then we must get busy, find them and learn their names, and teach them to listen to the voice of Him who saves, Him who is the gate.

In the first reading we hear what it should be like inside that sheep-pen ... a community, a koinonia in which all goodness is shared. We have a lot of work to do. If the Church in fact were that, if what Acts described then were the Church today, wouldn't we and all the churches be overflowing out onto the streets? Wouldn't all the negative voices be drowned out by the voice of the Good News? We have a lot of work to do,

that we all, those inside and outside this flock of sheep may hear their names called, know of and experience life more abundantly.